LAHOMA

BY

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SYNOPSIS.

Brick Willock, highwayman, saves one Gledware and a baby girl from being murdered by his fellow outlaws on the western plains.

Willock flees to the mountains and hides to escape the wrath of the outlaws he had outwitted. He learns that some one has discovered his hiding place.

Red Feather, an Indian chief, brings Willock a little white girl, named Lahoma, and instructs him to take care of her. He says her father is living with Indians.

Willock recognizes her as the daughter of a woman who had died and was buried near by. He begins to teach Lahoma correct English.

CHAPTER IV.

"Your mother's grave."

"I AIN'T got the tools yet, honey," went on Brick. "They's no breaking up and enriching land that ain't never bore nothing but buffalo grass without I have picks and spades and plows and harrers. I got to get my tools to begin."

She stiffened herself. "You needn't be afraid I'll cry. I want you to hurt me, if that the way."

"It ain't like a pain in the stomach, Lahoma. All I gets for you will be some books."

"Books? What are books?"

"Books?" Willock rubbed his bushy head in desperation. "Books? Why, they is just thoughts that somebody has ketched and put in a cage where they can't get away. If you want to be civilized you got to lasso other people's thoughts—people as has went to and fro and has learned life—and you got to dehorn them ideas and tame 'em."

Lahoma examined him with new interest. "Are you civilized?" Her countenance fell.

"Not to no wide extent, but I can ford toler'ble deep stream that would drown you, honey. I can write my own name and yours too, I reckon. Lahoma Gledware—yes, I'm toler'ble well versed on a capital G; you just make a gap with a flying tail to it."

"My name not Lahoma Gledware," she interposed in some severity. "My name Lahoma Willock. Beautiful name—lovely, like flower—Willock. Call me Lahoma Willock—like song of little stream; Gledware—hard, rough."

Brick Willock stared at her in amazement. "Where'd you get that from?"

"My name Lahoma Willock—Red Feather tell me."

He smoked in silence, puffing rapidly. "How came you to be named Lahoma Willock?"

Lahoma suggested thoughtfully, "All white people named Willock?"

"There's a few"—Willock shook his head—"with less agreeable names. But, after all, I'm glad you have my name. Well, honey, this is enough talk about being civilized. Now let's make the first move on the way. You want to see your mother's grave and lay some of these wild flowers on it. That's a part of being civilized, caring for graves is. It's just savages as forgets the past and consequently never learns nothing. Come along. Them moccasins will do famous until I can get you shoes from the settlements. But I got a pony the first time I ventured to Doan's store, and it'll carry you if I have to walk at your side. We'll make a festibul march of that journey and lay in clothes as a girl should wear and books to last through the winter."

Willock rose and explained that they must cross the mountain. As they traversed it he reminded her that she had not gathered any of the flowers that were scattered under sheltering bowlders.

"Why?" asked Lahoma, showing that her neglect to do so was intentional.

"Well, honey, don't you love and honor that mother that bore so much pain and trouble for you, traveling with you in her arms to the Oklahoma country, trying to make a home for you up there in the wilderness and at last dying from the hardships of the plains? Ain't she worth a few flowers?"

"She dead. She not see flowers, not smell flowers, not know."

Willock said nothing, but the next time they came to a clump of blossoms he made a nosegay. Lahoma watched him with a face as calm and unemotional as that of Red Feather himself.

"What you do with that?" She pointed at the flowers in his rough hand.

"I'm going to put 'em on your mother's grave."

"She not know, not see, not smell. She dead; mother dead."

"Lahoma, do you know anything about God?"

"Yes—Great Spirit. God make my path white."

"Well, I want God to know that somebody remembers your mother. It's God that smells the flowers on the graves of the dead."

They walked on. Pretty soon Lahoma began looking about for flowers, but they had reached the last barren ledge, and no more came in sight.

"Take these, Lahoma."

"No. Couldn't fool God." They began the last descent. Willock suddenly discovered that tears were slipping down the girl's face. Suddenly she cried joyfully, "Oh, look, look!" She darted toward the spot at the foot of a tall cedar where purple and white blossoms showed in profusion. She gathered an armful, and they went down to the plain.

"Her head's toward the west," he said as they stood beside the pile of stones. Lahoma placed the flowers at the western margin of the pyramid. Willock laid his at the foot of the grave.

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During the two years passed by Brick Willock in dreary solitude conditions about him had changed. The hardships of pioneer life which fifty years ago had obtained in the middle states yet prevailed in 1882 in the tract of land claimed by Texas under the name of Greer county, but the dangers of pioneer life were greatly lessened. As Lahoma made the acquaintance of the mountain range and explored the plain extending beyond the natural horseshoe, Willock believed she ran little danger from Indians. He himself had ceased to preserve his unrelaxing watchfulness. After all, it had been the highwaymen rather than the red men whom he had most feared, and after two years it did not seem likely that such volatile men would preserve the feeling of vengeance.

With the wisdom derived from his experience with wild natures, he carefully abstained from any attempt to force Lahoma's friendship; hence it was not long before he obtained it without reserve. In the meantime he talked incessantly, and to his admiration he presently found her manner of speech wonderfully like his own—both fluent and ungrammatical.

He knew nothing of grammar, to be sure, but there were times when his mistakes, echoed from her lips, struck upon his ear, and, though he might not always know how to correct them, he was prompt to suggest changes, testing each, as a natural musician judges music—by ear. Dissatisfied with his own standards, he was all the more impatient to depart on the expedition after mental tools, despite the dangers that might beset the journey.

His first task, prompted by the coming of Lahoma, had been to partition off the half of the dugout containing the stove for the child's private chamber. Cedar posts set in the ground and plastered with mud higher than his head left a space between the top and the apex of the ceiling that the temperature might be equalized in both rooms. Thus far, however, they did not stay in the dugout except long enough to eat and sleep, for the autumn had continued delightful, and the cove seemed to the child her home, of which the dugout was a sort of cellar. Concerning the stone retreat in the crevice she knew nothing. Willock did not know why he kept the secret since he trusted Lahoma with all his treasures, but the unreasoning reticence of the man of great loneliness still rested on him.

"Lahoma," he said one day, "there's a settler over yonder in the mountains across the south plain. How'd you like to pay him a visit?"

"I don't want anybody but you," said Lahoma promptly.

Willock stood on one leg, rubbing the other meditatively with his delighted foot. Not the quiver of a muscle, however, revealed the fact that her words had flooded his heart with sunshine. "Well, honey, that's in reason. But I've got to take you with me after books and winter supplies, and I don't like the idea of traveling alone. It come to me that I might get Mr. Settler to go too. Time was not so long ago when Injun bands was coming and going, and, although old Greer is beginning to be sprinkled up with settlers here and there, I can't get over the feel of the old times. They ain't no sensation as sticks by a man when he's come to be wedged in between forty-five and fifty as the feel of the old times."

"Well," said Lahoma earnestly, "I wish you'd leave me here when you go after them books. I don't want to be with no strangers. I want to just squat right here and bear myself company."

"That's in reason. But, honey, while you might be safe enough while bearing the same I would be plumb crazy worrying about you. I might not have good cause for worrying, but worrying—it ain't no bird that spreads its wings and goes north when cold weather comes; worrying—it's independent of causes and seasons."

"If you have got to be stayed with to keep you from worrying they ain't nothing more to be said."

"Just so. That there old settler, I have crossed a few words with him, and I believe he would do noble to travel with. He's as gruff and growly as a grizzly bear if you say a word to him, and if he'll just turn all that temper he's vented on me on to any strangers we may run up against on the trail he'll do invaluable."

"I'll go catch up the pony," said Lahoma briefly, "for I see the thing is to be did. This will be the first visit I ever made in my life when I wasn't drug by the Injuns."

"You mustn't say 'drug,' honey, unless specifying medicines and herbs. You must say 'dragged.' The Injuns dragged you from one village to another." He paused meditatively, muttering the word to himself, while Lahoma ran away to catch the pony. When she came back he said: "I've been a-weighing that word, Lahoma, and it don't seem to me that 'dragged' sounds proper. What do you think?"

"I don't like the sound of it neither," said Lahoma, shaking her head. "I think drug is softer. It kinder melts in the ear, and dragged sticks."

"Well, don't use neither one till I can find out." Presently he was swinging along across the plain toward the southwestern range, while the girl kept close beside him on the pony.

Brick Willock and the man he had come to see were very good types of the first settlers of Greer county—one a highwayman, hiding from his kind, the other a trapper by occupation, trying to keep ahead of the pursuing waves of immigration. It was the first time Lahoma had seen Bill Atkins, and as she caught sight of him before his dugout her eyes brightened with interest. He was a tall, lank man of about sixty-five, with a huge gray mustache and bushy hair of iron gray, but without a beard.

But Lahoma was not afraid of coyotes, catamounts or mountain lions, and she was not afraid of Bill Atkins. Her eyes brightened at the discovery that he held in his hand that which Willock had described to her as a book.

"Does he read?" she asked Willock breathlessly. "Does he read, Brick?"

The man looked up, saw Willock and bent over his book—discovered Lahoma on the pony and looked up again, unwillingly but definitely. "You never told me you had a little girl," he remarked gruffly.

"You never asked me," said Willock. "Get down, Lahoma, and make yourself at home."

The man shut his book. "What are you going to do?"

"Going to visit you. Turn the pony loose, Lahoma. He won't go far."

"Haven't you got all that north range to yourself?" Bill Atkins asked begrudgingly.

"Yap. How're you making it, Atkins?"

"Why, as long as I'm let alone I'm making it all right. It's being let alone that I can't ever accomplish. I no sooner get settled and make my turf dugout than here comes a stranger"—

"Name of Brick Willock, if you've forgot," interpolated Willock genially. "I'll just light my pipe, as I reckon there's no objections."

The man turned his back upon Willock, opened his book and read.

CHAPTER V.

Lahoma's Education Advances.

LAHOMA approached the block of wood that supported him, while Willock calmly stretched himself out on the grass. "Is that a book?" she asked, by way of opening up the conversation.

The man gripped it tighter and moved his lips busily. As she remained at his knee, he presently said, "Oh, no, it's a hand organ!"

Lahoma smiled pityingly. "Are you afraid of me, Atkins?"

The man looked up with open mouth. "Not exactly, kid!" There was something in her face that made him lose interest in his book. He kept looking at her.

"Then why don't you tell the truth? We won't hurt you."

The man opened his mouth and closed it. Then he said, "It's a book."

"Did you ever read it before?"

"This is the third time I've read it."

"Seems as it hasn't accomplished no good on you, as you still tell lies."

The man rose abruptly and laid the book on the seat. His manner was quite as discouraging as it had been from the start.

"Honey," interposed Willock, "that ain't to say a lie, not a real lie."

"Is it a hand organ?" Lahoma demanded sternly.

"In a manner of speaking, honey, it is a hand organ in the sense of shutting you off from asking questions. You learn to distinguish the sauces of speech as you gets older. Out in the big world people don't say this or that according as it is. They steeps their words in a sauce as suits the occasion. Don't be so quick to call 'lies' till you learns the flavor of a fellow's meaning, not by his words, but by the sauce he steeps 'em in."

"Don't get mad at me," said Lahoma to the trapper. "I want to be civilized, and I am investigating according."

The trapper, somewhat conciliated, reseated himself. He regarded the girl with greater interest, not without a certain approval. "How comes it that you aren't civilized, living with such a knowing specimen as your father?"

"My father's dead. Brick is my cousin, but I not knowing nothing of him till he saved my life two years ago and after that, me with the Indians and him all alone. Would you like to hear about it?"

"I wouldn't bother him, honey, with all that long story," interposed Willock, suddenly grown restive.

"Yes, tell me," said the trapper, moving over that she might find room on the block of wood beside him.

"We was crossing the plains—father, mother and me—in a big wagon. And men dressed up like Indians, they come whooping and shooting, and father turns around and drives with all he might—drives clear to yonder mountain. And mother dies, being that sick before, and the jolting too much for her. So father [illegible] on his horse and rides all night, and I all asleep. Well, those same men dressed like Indians, they was in a cabin 'way up north and had put their wigs and feathers off and was grabbling over what they stole from the other wagons. So father he sees the light from the window and rides up with me. And they takes him for a spy, and says they in a voice awful fierce just this way, 'Kill 'em both!'"

The trapper gave a start at the explosiveness of her tone.

Lahoma shouted again as harshly as she could. "'Kill 'em both,' says they." Then she turned to Willock. "Did I put them words in the correct sauce, Brick?"

"You done noble, honey."

Lahoma resumed: "Now it was in a manner of happening that Brick, he was riding around to have a look at the country, and when he rides up to the cabin, why, right outside there was me and father and two of the robbers about to kill us. 'What are you devils up to?' says Brick. 'You go to ——?' says the leading man. 'That's where we're going to send this spy and his little girl,' says he. 'You go to ——, and maybe you'll meet 'em there,' he says. And with that he ups and shoots at Brick, the bullet lifting his hat right off his head and scaring the horse out from under him, so he falls right there at the feet of them two robber men on his back. Brick, he never harmed nobody before in his life, but what was he to do? He might of let them kill him, but that would of left father and me in their grip, so he just grabs the gun out of the leading man's hand, as he hadn't ever carried a gun in his life his own self, and he shot both them robbers, him still laying there on his back."

"No, honey; I got no about that time."

"Brick, you fear me you was still laying there on your back just as you fell."

"Did I, honey? Well, I reckon I was then, for when I told you about it it was more recent."

"It's awful interesting," the trapper remarked dryly.

"Yes; ain't it?" Lahoma glowed. "Then father jumped on one horse with me, and Brick put out on another, and when I woke up the Indians were all everywhere, but Brick come here and lived all alone and nearly died because he didn't have me to comfort him. So the Indians took me, and they killed father, and for two years I was moved from village to village till Red Feather brought me to Brick. And then we found out we are cousins and he is going to civilize me. Brick, he remembers about a cousin of his, Cousin Martha Willock. Her sister went driving out to the Oklahoma

"He ups and shoots at Brick."

country with her husband and little girl and wasn't never heard of. I am the little girl, all right, and Brick, he's my second cousin. And wasn't it lucky Brick was riding around that night, looking at the country, when they was about to put daylight into me?"

"I'd think," remarked the trapper, "that he'd take you back to your Cousin Martha, for men folks like him and me aren't placed to take care of women folks."

"Yes, but he got a letter saying my Cousin Martha and all her family is done been swept away by a flood of the Mississippi river, and him and me is all they is left of the Willockses, so we got to stick together. Besides, you see, he killed them two robbers, and the rest of the gang is laying for him. Brick he feels so dreadful, he never having so much as put a scratch to a man's face before, for he wouldn't never fight as a boy, his conscience wouldn't rest if he was in civilization. He'd go right up to the first policeman he met and say: 'I done the deed. Carry me to the pen!' he'd say, and then what would become of me?"

"He might get another letter from your Cousin Martha to help him out of the scrape."

Lahoma stared at him, unable to grasp the significance of these foolish words, and Brick, seeking a diversion, explained his purpose of taking Lahoma to the settlements after supplies and proffered his petition that Bill Atkins accompany them.

Lahoma never forgot that expedition to the settlements. She did not think life would have been too long to devote to such pilgrimages. In the settlements she was bewildered, but never satiated with novelties, and on the way back everything she had seen was discussed, expounded and classified between her and Brick.

The journey back home had been far easier than the descent into Texas because both Willock and Atkins had supplied themselves with ponies—animals that sold ridiculously cheap at the outlying posts of the settlements. Brick Willock brought back with him something else to add cheerfulness and usefulness to approaching winter. This was a square window sash, set with four small panes of good glass. It was hard work to place this window in Lahoma's side of the dugout, but it was work thoroughly enjoyed. Lahoma's room was on the west, and from noon to sundown the advantage of the window was a source of never ending delight.

"Good thing we've got our window," Brick would say as they sat on the low, rude bench before the little stove and the furious wind of January howled overhead. Or, when the wintry sky was leaden and all Brick's side of the partition was as dark as the hole of a prairie dog, he would visit Lahoma and gloat over the dim, gray light stealing through the small panes. "That window's no bad idea!" he would chuckle.

"Good thing I've got my window," Lahoma would say as the snow lay thick on the plains and in broken lines all over the mountain and the cutting blast made the fire jump with sudden fright. She would hold her book close to the dirt square in which the frame was planted and spell out words she had never heard used, such as "lad," "lass," "sport" and the like mysteries. "This window is going to civilize me, Brick."

Spring came late that year, and in the early days of March Brick rode over to the cove behind the precipice after Bill Atkins. "I want you to come over to my place," he begged, "and answer some of Lahoma's questions. Being closeted with her in that there dugout all winter, she has pumped me as dry as a bone."

Perhaps Bill Atkins had his fill of solitude during that cold winter—or perhaps he was hungry for another hour of the little girl's company. Nothing, however, showed his satisfaction as he entered her chamber. "Here I am," he announced, seating himself on the bench. This was his only greeting.

"Is it drug or dragged?" demanded Lahoma.

"Dragged."

"Why don't God send me a little girl to play with, after me asking for one every night all winter?"

"Don't understand God's business," replied Atkins briefly.

"I puts it this way," Brick spoke up. "God's done sent one little girl, and it ain't right to crowd him too far."

"Will I be all they is of me as long as I live?"

"Nobody won't never come to live in these plains," Brick declared, "unless it's trappers and characters like us. But we'll stay by you, won't we, Bill Atkins?"

Atkins looked exceedingly gruff and shook his head as if he had his doubts about it. "You'll have to be taken to the States," he declared.

"But what would become of Brick?"

"Well, honey," said Brick, "you want to take your place with people in the big world, don't you?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Lahoma, starting up and stretching her arm toward the window. "In the big world—yes! That's the place for me—that's where I want to live. But what will become of you?"

"Well," Brick answered slowly, "the rock pile t'other side the mountain is good enough for me. Your mother sleeps under it."

"Oh, Brick!" She caught his arm. "You wouldn't die if I went away, would you?"

"Why, you see, honey, they wouldn't be nothing left to go on. I'd just sort of stop, you know. But it wouldn't matter. Out there in the big world people don't remember very long, and when you're grown you wouldn't know there'd ever been a cove with a dugout in it and a window in the wall and a Brick Willock to carry in the wood for the fire."

"I'll always remember—and I won't go without you. He could go with me, couldn't he, Bill?"

"I suspicion he has his reasons for not," Atkins observed gravely.

"I has, and I shall never go back to the States."

"Then what's the use civilizing me?" demanded Lahoma mournfully.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)